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Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

JAMES DOBBINS

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Testimony presented before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 26, 2009

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James Dobbins¹
The RAND Corporation

Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan²

Before the Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

February 26, 2009

In September of 2001 the United States was attacked from Afghanistan by a global terrorist network that is now headquartered in Pakistan. American attention is now being redirected toward this region. It is not a day too soon.

For the first several years after the collapse of the Taliban regime the Bush Administration ignored Afghanistan almost entirely. In Pakistan, its focus was almost entirely on Al Qaeda, while it largely ignored the Pakistani regime's continuing ties to the extremist groups that were organizing to reclaim control of Afghanistan. In President Bush's second term this attitude began to change. For the past several years the United States has begun to put more resources into Afghanistan, and to pressure the government in Islamabad to confront the enemy within. But these efforts have remained what the military call an economy of force exercise. As JCS Chairman Mullen acknowledged a little more than a year ago, "In Afghanistan we do what we can. In Iraq we do what we must."

Afghanistan is larger and more populous than Iraq. It is more isolated and inaccessible. It is far poorer and less developed. And it has been in civil war for the past thirty years. Yet we still have several advantages in Afghanistan that we lacked in Iraq, given the nature of our entry. First of all, the American presence in Afghanistan remains more popular than it ever was in Iraq. Second, Karzai retains more popularity than any leader in Iraq has yet been able to secure. Thirdly, we have far more international support for our efforts in Afghanistan than we ever did in Iraq. Fourthly, all Afghanistan's neighbors and near neighbors, with the partial exception of Pakistan, helped form the Karzai government, fully accept its legitimacy, and wish to see it succeed. Finally, sectarian animosities in Afghanistan are less intense than Iraq. Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and the Shia all compete for wealth and power but none challenge the identity of Afghanistan as a multi-ethnic bilingual state, none seek to secede, or to drive others out.

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It is also worth noting that our opponents in Afghanistan are as disunited as they were, and are in Iraq. We speak of the Taliban as if it were a united enemy, but it represents only one of a number of insurgent groups headquartered in Pakistan. They are united in seeking to drive us out of Afghanistan and topple the government in Kabul, but otherwise have little in common.

These conditions are changing, and for the most part they are changing for the worse. Afghans are becoming increasingly critical of our presence. President Karzai is losing domestic and international support. Violence is increasing and civilian casualties climbing, threatening to generate new refugee flows and exacerbate tensions among ethnic groups. Thus the shift in attention from Iraq to Afghanistan has come none too soon.

Although the Administration is still reviewing its Afghan policy, the broad outlines are apparent – an increase in American troop strength, pressure on Karzai to crack down on corruption, the appointment of Richard Holbrooke as special envoy for both Afghanistan and Pakistan and a recognition that stability in Afghanistan requires changes in Pakistan as well. There are several further steps the United States and its allies should consider.

First, unify the NATO and American military command chain.

Second, do the same the civilian effort.

Third, bolster the military and civilian staffs in Afghanistan.

Fourth, institute a bottom up component to our counterinsurgency strategy to complement the top down approach we have followed to date.

Fifth, pay more attention to Afghan insurgent activities in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan.

Sixth, support the upcoming Afghan elections, while remaining scrupulously neutral among the possible candidates.

Seventh, intensify our engagement with Afghanistan's neighbors.

Unifying Military Command

Since 1942, when the U.S. and UK established a combined command for the invasion of North Africa, American and its European allies have operated together through a common military command structure, with a supreme commander responding both to the American President, and the leadership of the other allied governments. This is how we waged the Cold War, and conducted the post-Cold War interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. Afghanistan is the first place where the American and NATO command chains have diverged.

At present the American and allied military effort in Afghanistan are divided between Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). There are American and allied troops in both command chains. Both chains report ultimately to American generals, one in Tampa Florida and the other in Mons, Belgium. ISAF is presently the larger of the two forces, operating under General Bantz Craddock, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander. OEF, the smaller force, comes under General David Petraeus, head of the U.S. Central Command.

Within Afghanistan the command chain of these two forces converge under yet another American General, David McKiernan, before diverging toward Tampa and Mons. The two forces operate in generally distinct geographic areas, but some assets are necessarily employed in support of both, and some intermingling cannot be avoided. Divided command of this sort inevitably produces unnecessary friction, and is a standing invitation to misunderstanding, failure to render prompt assistance, and at the worst, fratricide. Of course we can continue to muddle through with this complex and confusing arrangement, as we have for the past several years, but there can be no hope that Petraeus and Holbrooke can pull off in Afghanistan the sort of reversal that Petraeus and Crocker managed to produce in Iraq in 2007 as long as Petraeus has control over less than half the American and allied forces in Iraq.

There is a simple solution to this problem. There are currently two major NATO commands, one in Mons, Belgium, and the other in Norfolk Virginia. The Norfolk command is charged with "transformation", that is to say the modernization of allied militaries along common lines. This is yesterday's top priority, and perhaps tomorrow's, but it is certainly not today's. Why not transfer these responsibilities back to SACEUR, in Mons, relieving that commander of responsibility for Afghanistan, while moving this second major NATO headquarters to Tampa, putting it under General Petraeus, and giving it and him undivided authority for Afghanistan. Alternatively, NATO could create a third major command for Afghanistan in Tampa, while keeping the two it already has.

This move would allow OEF and ISAF to be combined into a single force under a unified command chain all the way up to the American president and the NATO Council. Some allies want to do only peacekeeping but not counterinsurgency, others only counterinsurgency but not counterterrorism. They might oppose combining OEF and ISAF fearing that their own missions might change. It should be possible to accommodate these limitations within the structure of a single force with several separable missions. Yet even if the OEF and ISAF command chains cannot be fully merged, the efficacy of both will be immensely enhanced if they run in parallel from top to bottom, rather than diverge as they do at present.

Unifying Civil Reconstruction

Successful counterinsurgency or COIN requires the intense integration of civilian and military expertise and activity. This is very difficult, particularly when done on a multilateral basis. The civil COIN effort in Afghanistan is particularly fragmented due to the failure, going back to late 2001, to create a structure and appoint a single leader to pull these activities together.

Holbrooke's appointment puts a single official in charge of American non-military activities in Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan. Several European governments have recently moved to create similar positions. It would be helpful if the Europeans could be encouraged to appoint a single individual, representing the European Union, to coordinate their national efforts and work with Holbrooke on a unified Western approach to stabilization and reconstruction in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

We also need to give some greater coherence to provincial reconstruction efforts. There are currently 26 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan, of which the majority are run not by the United States, but by 13 other allied governments. There is no central structure overseeing these disparate efforts, setting common standards, establishing development priorities and otherwise supporting these teams. The U.S and the other governments fielding PRTs should establish a common administrative office in Kabul which would be responsible for developing a common doctrine, working with NATO, the UN, the World Bank, the Afghan government and other donors to set development goals and channel additional resources to these provincial teams.

Bolstering Staff

Throughout the sixteen month American occupation of Iraq, the Coalition Provision Authority was never more than fifty percent staffed. What is even more surprising, neither was CJTF-7, the top American military headquarters in Iraq. These staffing shortfalls go far in explaining deficiencies in American performance during that crucial period.

By 2007, these deficiencies had been largely corrected. The surge in troop strength was accompanied by a significant build up in both the quantity and quality of the civilian and military staffs in Baghdad. Crocker had half a dozen former Ambassadors working for him. Petraeus had the support not only of a very talented military staff, but of a number of civilians who came with expertise not normally found within the armed services. The State Department and AID were also able to fully staff and run twenty two Provincial Reconstruction Teams located throughout the country.

It was this pool of talent which allowed Petraeus and Crocker to manage the immensely complex and sophisticated strategies that divided our enemies in Iraq, brought former insurgents over to our side, deterred outside meddling and turned the security situation around.

Afghanistan now requires the same sort of surge in the quantity and above all the quality of civilian and military talent, both at the headquarters level and in the field. At present the American PRTs in Afghanistan are still run by the military, in contrast to Iraq. The US will find additional troops for Afghanistan by moving them from Iraq. It may not be possible for State and AID to do likewise. Indeed the burden on our diplomats and aid officials in Iraq may grow as the military presence recedes. Congress should therefore help State and AID generate the resources to surge in Afghanistan even as they hold steady in Iraq.

Building From the Bottom Up

Among the elements which reversed Iraq's descent into civil war were a counterinsurgency strategy which gave priority to public security, not force protection, and the decision to organize, arm, and pay large elements of the population that had previously supported the insurgency.

Replicating the first of these effects in Afghanistan will be impossible with the American, allied and Afghan forces at our disposal. The Afghan population is larger than the Iraqi and much more dispersed. Afghan police and military forces are much smaller, as are American and allied troop numbers even after the planned U.S. reinforcement. American, allied and Afghan soldiers

will be able to protect the populations in the contested areas only if elements of this population are also enlisted in the effort.

The initial American approach in Afghanistan was bottom up. The US worked with a number of warlords, militia and tribal leaders, including the Northern Alliance and Hamid Karzai, to overthrow the Taliban. More recently the United States and its allies have adopted a largely top down strategy in Afghanistan, seeking to build up the capacity of the government in Kabul to provide security, justice, education, health, electricity and other public services to its rural population. Progress has been too slow, in part because we wasted the first several years after the fall of the Taliban, but also because, unlike Iraq, Afghanistan has never had much of a central government.

Current circumstances require that we combine the top down and bottom up approaches. A counter insurgency strategy emphasizing the delivery of security and other public services to the rural populations can only succeed if those populations are enlisted in the effort. The Afghan government has pioneered some efforts in this regard, but more will be needed. This will prove quite controversial. The Afghan tribal structures are very distinct from those in Iraq, and any effort to replicate the “Sons of Iraq” will need to be adjusted considerably to suit local conditions. Many in the central government will fear that local empowerment will come at their expense. The Tajik, Uzbek and Shia leadership will fear that we are arming their enemies, the Pashtuns, just as the Shia and Kurdish leaders in Iraq looked at the Sunni Awakening skeptically. Wending our way through these minefields is precisely why our military and civilian staffs in Kabul, and the field need to be reinforced with real experts in the region, in counterinsurgency, and economic development.

Focusing on Baluchistan

Insofar as the United States has focused on the sanctuaries from which the Afghan rebels are operating, it has directed its aid, and its Predator strikes on the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) within it. This is where the insurgent groups targeting American troops in eastern Afghanistan are headquartered, and also where Al Qaeda leaders are located. But the Taliban operates dominantly in the south, not the east of Afghanistan, and does so from the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, not the NWFP. The Taliban Shura, or governing council is known to meet in the city of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan. Many American reinforcements are slated to be heading to the south of Afghanistan, where they will thus be facing an enemy controlled from Baluchistan.

The utility of targeted killings employing Predator drones over Pakistan is debatable, but to the extent it is useful, there seems no good reason to limit the activity to the NWFP. The extension of American economic assistance and of effective Pakistani government authority over the border region might actually be somewhat easier in Baluchistan, since unlike the FATA, this border area is at least juridical covered by Pakistani law, and fully within the country's political system.

Supporting the Elections

The presidential elections scheduled for later this year could be a major turning point, either enhancing public support for the country's leadership, or moving it further toward civil war. The United States will have a major stake in the outcome, but will need to remain scrupulously neutral if that outcome is to be regarded as legitimate.

This imperative will effectively limit the amount of pressure American officials can usefully put on President Karzai. In recent weeks the Afghan President has come under increasing criticism from Washington for tolerating corruption and failing to meet the aspirations of his people for peace and economic development. No doubt these criticisms are valid, but the Administration and the Congress should resist the temptation to blame Afghanistan's leadership for our failures. It is only necessary to recall back in 2007, when the Congress was busy benchmarking the Iraqi government, implicitly threatening to abandon them if they did not achieve certain legislative goals. Well, the Iraqi leadership have begun to meet many of those goals, but only after American and Iraqi forces created the security conditions in which mutual accommodation among rival factions became feasible.

A certain level of criticism of Karzai can actually enhance our *bona fides* as a genuinely neutral party in the contest, given that he is widely, if inaccurately, seen as something of an American creation. Taken too far, however, such pressure could begin to look like Washington was trying to jettison him in favor of another candidate. This could have disastrous consequences.

Whatever we do, Karzai stands a good chance of winning this election, if not on the first ballot, as he did last time, on the second. A far worse occurrence would be an inconclusive or contested result. At present everyone outside Afghanistan and very nearly everyone inside agrees that Hamid Karzai is the legitimate, freely elected President of Afghanistan. Our overriding objective, in how we approach this year's elections, must be to ensure that whoever wins enjoys at least the same degree of acceptance and support inside and outside that country.

Engaging the Neighbors

Afghanistan is a poor, desolate, isolated and inaccessible state surrounded by more powerful neighbors. It has never been fully self sufficient. Its internal peace has always depended upon the attitude of external parties. When its neighbors perceived a common interest in a peaceful Afghanistan, it was at peace. When they did not, it was at war.

In the aftermath of 9/11 the United States worked closely with Afghanistan's neighbors and near neighbors to overthrow the Taliban and replace it with a broadly representative, democratically based regime. This unlikely set of partners consisted of Iran, India, and Russia, long-term backers of the Northern Alliance, and Pakistan, until then the patrons of the Taliban.

Reconstituting this coalition should be the current objective of American diplomacy. Holbrooke and Petraeus should be encouraged to work closely not just with our European allies, but with all these regional governments, including Iran, with which the United States collaborated very effectively in late 2001.

At some point a new international conference, with participation similar to that which met in Bonn in November of 2001 to establish the Karzai regime, might help advance this process. The product of such a conference might be an agreement:

- Among all parties to declare Afghanistan a permanently neutral country;
- By Afghanistan not to permit its territory to be used to against the interests of any of its neighbors;
- By its neighbors and near neighbors not to allow their territory to be used against Afghanistan;
- By Afghanistan and Pakistan to recognize their common border;
- By all other parties to guarantee that border; and
- By the United States and its NATO allies to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan as soon as these other provisions have been implemented.

Such a package would give all the participants something of value. Pakistan would secure Afghan recognition of its border and assurances that India would not be allowed to use Afghan territory to pressure or destabilize Pakistan's own volatile border regions. Afghanistan would gain an end to cross border infiltration and attacks. Iran would get assurances that the American military presence on its eastern border would not be permanent.

The Afghan people desperately want peace. They continue to hope that their freely elected government, the United States and NATO can bring it to them. American forces continue to be welcome in Afghanistan in a way they have never been in Iraq. But public support for Karzai, his government, and the American presence is diminishing. Additional American troops and more aid dollars may be able to reverse, or at least slow these negative trends, but in the long term Afghanistan will be at peace only if its neighbors want it to be. Building such a consensus must be the main objective of American diplomacy in the region.

Long Term Goals

I am often asked to suggest what our longer term goals in Afghanistan should be. Do we seek a secular democracy, a more developed economy, a strong centralized government, a fully self sufficient state capable of securing its territory and populace? If so, how realistic are these aims. These, it seems to me, are not questions that we can or should try to answer definitively at this point. Democratization, development, capacity building and diplomacy, fighting the insurgents and negotiating with those that can be won over should all be viewed not as independent goals, but as components of an overall counterinsurgency strategy designed to secure the population.

This our job is neither to “defeat the Taliban” nor to determine the future shape of Afghan society. The American and allied objective should be to reverse the currently negative security trends and ensure that fewer innocent Afghans are killed next year than this year. In a counterinsurgency campaign, this is the difference between winning and losing – are you successfully protecting the population or not. If, as a result of our efforts, the current rise in violence is reversed and the populace made more secure, the Afghan people will be able to determine their own future through the peaceful, rather than violent competition of ideas, people, and political factions. This has begun to happen in Iraq. Our objective should be to give the Afghans the same opportunity.